

(2/8/23) This resource is from the national  
Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA

**Featured:**

**>Countering the Impending Tidal Wave of Unnecessary Referrals for Special Assistance and Special Education**

**>What's being done to increase attendance at this critical time?**

**>Links to a few other relevant shared resources**

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**For discussion and interchange:**

**>Countering the Impending Tidal Wave of Unnecessary Referrals for Special Assistance and Special Education**

**Read and discuss the following news clip and our Center's related comments.**

From: ***Bracing for a Tidal Wave of Unnecessary Special Education Referrals***

Students pegged for evaluation may be struggling due to disrupted learning or show trauma-related behaviors and may not have disabilities at all.

Amid disturbing data emerging about disruptions to student learning associated with COVID-19, we are concerned that a tidal wave of referrals for special education services (potentially one out of every three or four children) will flood the nation's schools.

High rates of absenteeism, lagging academic gains, a student mental health crisis, a decrease in interventions provided to children ages 0-3 and a shortage of special ed teachers and staffers all raise fears that districts are unprepared to respond....

Colleagues report increasing referrals for evaluation due to behavioral challenges exacerbated by the trauma associated with the pandemic. At the same time, while many students undoubtedly require extra support, many children identified for referrals may not have a disability at all, but rather are struggling due to disruptions to their learning.... districts must address instructional loss for all students while reserving highly specialized instruction, services and accommodations for students with documented disabilities....

School leaders and policymakers can prevent this scenario from unfolding. To stem the tide of referrals, we recommend:

... Ensure that evaluations refer children for special education services only when there is an actual disability, and not when the primary cause of their learning challenges are a lack of instruction or English language proficiency....

Expand and enhance training for all educators in inclusive and differentiated practices like Universal Design for Learning, whose evidence-based and flexible approaches enable educators to anticipate learner variability in the general education classroom...

## Center Comments

**As is often the case, the above article clearly identifies a growing problem, but their solution does not go far enough.**

Our society's commitment to equity, fairness, and justice is reflected in the efforts by a school to do the best for all students. However, for this commitment to be meaningful, schools cannot continue to marginalize efforts to transform student/learning supports.

The pandemic has exacerbated concerns about addressing learning, behavior, and emotional problems. Unfortunately, the response at too many schools has been to call for more resources to do more of the same and end up helping a relatively small number of students.

Of particular concern is the increased focus on screening and referring students who are experiencing problem. This emphasis tends to produce a "field of dreams" effect (i.e., *build it, and they will come*). Putting aside the many deficiencies related to such screening and referral processes, the number of referrals at some schools is so large that review systems are quickly overwhelmed.

Some referrals are to teams meant to recommend forms of special assistance; others are seeking to assign students to special education. By early in the school year, there often are more referrals than can be processed over the year, and only a small percentage of students will be helped.

Rather than perpetuate what in the past was inadequate in meeting the nature and scope of need, it is time for schools to transform their student/learning supports into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to learning and teaching and for reengaging disconnected students and families.

Based on our research over many years, we have done analyses and developed prototype frameworks to guide such a transformation. See

>[\*Rethinking Student and Learning Supports\*](#)

>[\*Student/Learning Supports: A Brief Guide for Moving in New Directions\*](#)

**We also offer free technical assistance and coaching.**

For more resources related to countering the tidal wave of referrals, see our online clearinghouse Quick Finds. Here are some examples:

>[\*Classroom based learning supports\*](#)

>[\*Misdiagnosis\*](#)

>[\*Prevention for students at risk\*](#)

>[\*Response to intervention\*](#)

**For discussion and interchange:**

>[\*\*\*What's being done to increase attendance at this critical time?\*\*\*](#)

School attendance problems provide another indication of the need to move forward in new directions for student and learning supports. Policy and practice must evolve so schools, families, and communities are working together to develop a system of interventions that reflects the complexity of attendance problems. As the complexity illustrates, addressing the problem requires moving to more comprehensive, multidimensional, and cohesive solutions.

**As stimuli for discussion, here are a few excerpts from articles focused on improving attendance.**

*Lumping all absences together ... is a distorted picture.... It is well documented that Black, Hispanic, and students from low-income backgrounds accrue substantially more absences than their peers. Yet, progress has been relatively slow in understanding how and when these student subgroups accrue absences, as well as the extent to which such disparities are linked to within-school factors, such as poor school climate and culture, rather than individual- or family-level characteristics. Liu & Lee*

*Interorganizational networks can be one approach for helping connect to schools and local or state resources, while helping to lead improvement efforts that schools are unable to address on their own. Interorganizational networks are also used to connect schools to professional development opportunities, expertise on pedagogical and leadership content, administrative support, policy implementation, and coordinating strategies that can lead to improvement in students' academic outcomes and opportunities.... Childs & Grooms*

>>From: [These 6 strategies can help schools tackle chronic absenteeism](#)

In 2021, the Connecticut Department of Education launched the *Learner Engagement and Attendance Program* to help K-12 students struggling with absenteeism and disengagement during the pandemic. They asked districts: “Where do you see most absenteeism? Where are the trends?” Then they took action across the districts. They found the following six tactics helped rein in chronic absenteeism.

- **Providing transportation and a morning routine** “... A lack of safe and reliable transportation is a basic cause of student absences, so districts should make a concerted effort to provide that or work with community partners who can.... Districts can also give out bus or subway cards.... Another big plus is providing breakfast to students regardless of family income, which helps establish reliable routines for families and decrease absenteeism....”
- **Tracking the data and creating attendance teams.** “A district-wide attendance team that meets monthly to review attendance, provides support and feedback to school-based attendance teams....”
- **Creating connections with and among students.** “Schools can create cohorts of students who meet regularly to help them build connections among themselves....” “Mentors — including teachers or any other adult at the school — can help students feel connected to their educational environment.... “
- **Forging relationships with parents.** “Build relationships with families, and connection, and work with them to identify additional support they might need....”
- **Don't be punitive.** “When it comes to reengaging chronically absent Black and brown students, it's especially important to create solutions centered around their specific challenges.”
- **Get creative with half days.** “... make half days more meaningful for students. ... Students now spend half days working on ‘success plans’ that include academic, career, social-emotional and personal goals, as well as completing activities like strength exploration assessments.”

>>From: [Be There and Be Present: An Interorganizational Network to Improve School Attendance](#)

This article “explores a county-wide initiative to improve school attendance through a successful network collaboration among organizations within the county. ... First, working groups were created to identify attendance issues in districts to fully understand how students were being affected by not being in school. Second, these working groups created recommendations that would serve as guideposts as it worked with communities to improve attendance. For example, one recommendation was to have organizations invest monetary resources for professional development of school crossing guards. ... These funds were seen as a way to provide crossing guards with professional development and training on how to identify student issues, communicate with parents and guardians effectively, and nurture budding student relationships that could foster improved attendance outcome.

Another recommendation suggested that community organizations focus their efforts on noneducational needs of students within the region. For example, Homewood Children's Village Cradle to Career Pathway hired staff dedicated to ensuring students' needs were being met at school and at home such as housing, clothing, food, mental and physical health, and safety.”

>>From: **Beyond Chronic Absenteeism: The Dynamics and Disparities of Class Absences in Secondary School**

A deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of absenteeism has the potential to provide better solutions for the school attendance issue, especially those targeted toward students who need the most support....

Analysis of student self-reported school culture and climate measures indicates that students who have higher disengagement rates tend to have a poorer sense of belonging to their schools, perceive a lower level of academic support, express less agreement with the fairness of discipline, rules, and norms at their schools, and show more concerns about school safety. Lower perception of school climate and culture is especially salient for the most disengaged students....

Our evidence implies that interventions targeting the most disengaged students early in a school year and in the lower secondary grades, as well as interventions that seek to improve school climate and culture, might be particularly promising approaches to mitigating disengagement....

While our findings point to the prevalence of school disengagement, especially for minoritized and disadvantaged student populations, they also point to a few ways to potentially reduce absenteeism in more effective ways. Multiple targeted interventions have successfully decreased absences by leveraging various individual-level and environmental factors. ... For example, mentoring aspects of the Check and Connect program may boost students' perceptions of being supported by their schools and help them build relationships with in-school adults, ... student attendance could potentially improve as a direct benefit of this intervention.

*A nuanced understanding of patterns of attendance beyond chronic absenteeism can serve as a future gateway toward improving student engagement in more meaningful and effective ways. Liu & Lee*

For more, see the links to online resources on the Center's Quick Find on [Attendance](#).

>**Links to a few other relevant shared resources**

[Mapping transformative schools](#)

[Young people's online communication and its association with mental well-being](#)

[School-based interventions to improve emotional regulation skills in adolescent students: A systematic review](#)

[The Evolution of the Role of U.S. School Nurses in Adolescent Mental Health at the Individual, Community, and Systems Level](#)

[Is project-based learning effective among kindergarten and elementary students? A systematic review](#)

[13 videos about addressing trauma and fostering resilience in the REL West video playlist.](#)

[Youth & the Juvenile Justice System: 2022 National Report](#)

[Investing in Community-Based Care for Children and Youth Involved with Child Welfare](#)

[What Is Neurodiversity?](#)

[Surgeon general: 13-year-olds too young to join social media](#)

**Note: Previous postings of the Center's Community of Practice Practitioner offer discussions and links to other resources**

Also see our [recent posting](#) for a sample of Center's resources that can be used for pre-service and continuing professional education and by policy makers and the general public at large.

## A Few Upcoming Webinars

For links to the following and for more webinars, go to the Center's Links to Upcoming/Archived Webcasts/Podcasts – <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/webcast.htm>

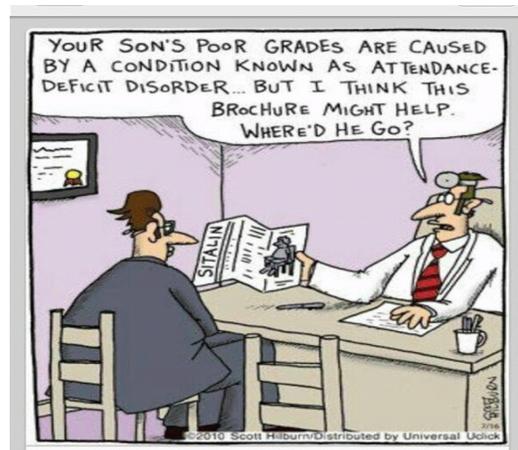
- 2/8 A Seat at the Table: Chronic Teacher Shortage
- 2/9 Ways to Operationalize Stakeholder Engagement
- 2/9 Prevention and Intervention Efforts to Address Bullying and School Violence
- 2/10 Flipping the Script for Staff Meetings - Strategies to Create a Culture of Collaboration
- 2/13 Advocating for Transformative Schools
- 2/15 School violence prevention
- 2/15 Preparing students for their transition out of high school
- 2/16 Rethinking Race and Education Seminar
- 2/17 Equity driven strategies for addressing chronic absence
- 2/21 Middle level students planning for high school
- 2/22 Paving the Way to College for Students Experiencing Homelessness
- 2/23 Rethinking Race and Education Seminar
- 2/28 The power of relationships in supporting positive school climate
- 2/28 Behavioral threat assessment best practices

## To Listserv Participants

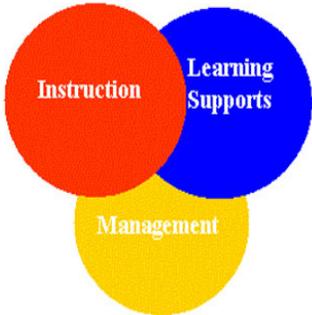
- **Please share this resource with others.** (Everyone has a stake in the future of public education and this is a critical time for action.)
- **Let us know what's going on** to improve how schools address barriers to learning & teaching and reengage disconnected students and families. (We can share the info with the over 130,000 on our listserv.)
- **For those who have been forwarded this and want to receive resources directly, send an email to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)**
- **Looking for information?** (We usually can help.)
- **Have a suggestion for improving our efforts?** (We welcome your feedback.)

***We look forward to hearing from you!***

***Send to [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)***



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For information about the  
**National Initiative for Transforming Student and Learning Supports**  
go to <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newinitiative.html>

Equity of opportunity is fundamental to enabling civil rights;  
transforming student and learning supports is fundamental to  
promoting whole child development, advancing social justice,  
and enhancing learning and a positive school climate.

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**THE MORE FOLKS SHARE, THE MORE USEFUL AND INTERESTING THIS RESOURCE BECOMES!**

**For new sign-ups – email [Ltaylor@ucla.edu](mailto:Ltaylor@ucla.edu)**

**Also send resources ideas, requests, comments, and experiences for sharing.**

**We post a broad range of issues and responses to the Net Exchange on our website at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/newnetexchange.htm> and on Facebook (access from the Center's home page <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/> )**